

SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

The marketing of nicotine addiction by one oral snuff manufacturer

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Abstract

Oral snuff is a form of smokeless tobacco that has been shown to cause oral cancer, gum disease, and nicotine dependence. Since 1970 use of oral snuff has soared among young males. I believe this increased use is a direct result of an industry advertising and marketing campaign that encourages young non-users to experiment with low nicotine starter products with the intent of graduating new users up to higher nicotine brands as dependence progresses. This article reviews internal industry documents offered into evidence in a 1986 Oklahoma court case, tobacco and advertising industry trade literature, and advertising and promotional material that shows how one snuff manufacturer markets nicotine dependence to young people.

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Introduction

Oral snuff is a finely cut, processed tobacco which the user places between the cheek and gum. Nicotine is released from the tobacco and absorbed by the membranes of the mouth. In 1986 the US Surgeon General concluded that use of this product causes oral cancer, gum disease, and nicotine addiction.¹ More recent research suggests that snuff use increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, including heart attack.²

In recent years, use of oral snuff has risen dramatically among young men. From 1970 to 1991, the prevalence of snuff use among men aged 18 and older rose from 1.5% to 3.3%; among men 18-24 years old, it increased more than eightfold from 0.7% to 6.2%, making this age group the heaviest users of the product among those surveyed.³ The 1990 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 24% of all white male high school students had used smokeless tobacco at least once during the past month.⁴ A 1989 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) survey of college athletes found a

40% increase (from 20% to 28%) in smokeless tobacco use from 1985 to 1989.⁵ Among NCAA baseball players, an alarming 57% were users.⁵ There is new evidence which suggests that these increases are no accident, but the result of a sophisticated marketing campaign that developed, advertised, and promoted use of oral snuff starter products with low levels of free (un-ionised) nicotine as part of a graduation strategy that intended new users to move up to brands higher in nicotine as tolerance developed. The high nicotine brands are highly addictive and high in cancer-causing nitrosamines.

Two studies published in this issue of *Tobacco Control* confirm that the amount of nicotine available for uptake by snuff consumers varies systematically according to brand.^{6,7} This paper will describe the evidence available which indicates how manufacturers manipulate free nicotine levels, the role of starter brands in one company's "graduation" strategy, and how advertising and promotions encourage experimentation and nicotine addiction among new users. The evidence presented here has been collected from a variety of sources, including documents offered into evidence in a 1986 Oklahoma court case, tobacco and advertising industry trade literature, Congressional hearings, and other sources.

Control of free nicotine

Oral snuff manufacturers control the nicotine levels delivered to their consumers by controlling the amount of total nicotine in their brands, the level of free nicotine that is available for uptake into the body, and, in the case of Skoal Bandits, the size of the dose by using portion packs of tobacco in a mouth bag. In the 1986 Oklahoma court case *Marsee vs US Tobacco Company*, the plaintiff's attorney discussed a 1981 document on US Tobacco Company (UST) stationery from Per Erik Lindquist, UST's Senior Vice President of marketing, to Barry J Nova, President of the Tobacco Division. The document explained why the levels of nicotine were controlled: "Flavorwise we should try for innovation. Taste and strength (nicotine) should be medium, recognizing the fact that virtually all tobacco usage is based upon nicotine ('the kick') satisfaction."^{8,9}

Total nicotine is controlled through selection and blending of tobacco leaf. Levels of

free nicotine are controlled by adjusting the pH, which is done through fermentation, by adding alkaline buffering agents such as sodium carbonate and ammonium carbonate, or by altering moisture content. Free nicotine, which is formed as the pH of the tobacco increases, is rapidly absorbed across the membranes of the mouth into the body.¹⁰ The two alkalinising chemicals just mentioned appear on the list of non-tobacco materials used as additives in moist snuff that the industry trade association, the Smokeless Tobacco Council, supplied to the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Health and the Environment in April 1994.¹¹

The Swedish Tobacco Company, which also manufactures oral snuff and owns the US snuff company Pinkerton Tobacco Company, intentionally controls the level of free nicotine. The company commented on its production process in a 1994 report,¹² *Smokeless Tobacco from Gothenburg* (translated from Swedish): "In order to release the nicotine from the tobacco, the snuff is made slightly alkaline – sodium carbonate is added during the production process as this alters into bicarbonate."

The company's fact sheet entitled *Sunsets innehåll*¹³ [*The content of snuff*] further states (translated from Swedish): "Sodium carbonate (Na_2CO_3), which is active in increasing the pH level, makes nicotine more easily released from the tobacco and subsequently facilitates the uptake of nicotine through the mucous membranes of the mouth. The sodium carbonate is altered in the snuff into bicarbonate (NaHCO_3)."

In an October 1994 article in the *Wall Street Journal*,¹⁴ two former UST chemists were quoted on how the company apparently manipulates nicotine: "US Tobacco routinely adds chemicals to its snuff to deliver the free nicotine faster and to make the product stronger" – Larry Story (former US Tobacco chemist). "The fermentation process involves adding chemicals and, at the end, you add some more chemicals which increase pH too.... Without increasing the pH, you couldn't get nicotine release." – James C. Taft (former US Tobacco chemist). "It (Copenhagen) was brought up to a pH of 7.8 by adding more sodium carbonate and ammonium carbonate" – Larry Story.

Starter brands and the "graduation" strategy

If a new user starts with the standard high nicotine brands such as UST's Skoal Fine Cut or Copenhagen, a toxic response such as dizziness or nausea may occur. The novice is more likely to quit before tolerance to the toxic effects of nicotine develops. To respond to this problem and to expand its user base, UST developed low nicotine starter brands: Happy Days, Skoal Bandits, and Skoal Long Cut.

Happy Days was a loose, fine-cut tobacco with low free nicotine which was first introduced in the late 1960s. Evidence from the *Marsee vs UST* court case shows UST concern

with three design problems – "float", "lip burn", and "size of pinch" – that prevented new users from getting accustomed to the smokeless tobacco.¹⁵ "Float" referred to movement of the tobacco around the mouth, which could possibly result in too quick a release of nicotine or poor contact with oral tissue. "Lip burn" could be caused by the chemical and physical irritation of the tobacco contacting the oral tissues. The size of the pinch is critical if a new user is to achieve a sufficient pharmacological response from nicotine but not one so high that it induces a toxic effect such as nausea. Based on these problems, UST embarked on the "Lotus Project" to develop a starter portion pack of tobacco product in a teabag-like pouch.

Three documents from the *Marsee vs UST* court case further elaborated on the strategy. In minutes from a 1968 meeting, LA Bantle, then a UST vice president and later company chairman and chief executive officer, stated: "We must sell the use of tobacco in the mouth and appeal to young people... we hope to start a fad."¹⁶

In the same document Dr Word B Bennett, who was in charge of research for UST, summarised the meeting's recommendations, one of which was: "Develop new products. For example, artificial snuff – a consumable confectionery which would satisfy the snuff user".¹⁶

Two later documents from 1972 further described the Lotus Project.¹⁵ The project was first developed by United Scandia International, a joint venture between UST and Swedish Tobacco Company. A memorandum of 2 June 1972 described the activities of two working groups, one from UST and the other from Swedish Tobacco. A second Lotus document, dated 18 July 1972, was the minutes of a meeting held at UST headquarters in which Bantle stated that he wanted a Lotus Project – smokeless tobacco in a portion pack for the US market – and instructed a UST task force to embark on this. As part of those minutes, the Lotus Project was described, and the target group was defined as "new users, mainly cigarette smokers, age group 15–35". The "strength" of the new product was termed "nicotine satisfaction", and the product was compared to UST's existing brand Happy Days. In 1983, UST introduced Skoal Bandits, which closely resembled the product described in the 1972 memorandum. This design controlled tobacco placement and the size of the dose. It also avoided the tobacco having direct tissue contact.

In 1984, UST introduced another new starter product called Skoal Long Cut, which further addressed these problems.¹⁷ The Long Cut used larger pieces of tobacco and included a binding agent that allowed the user to pack the tobacco into a tight bolus, thus avoiding the "float". The bolus may also allow for a uniform, slow release of nicotine and may be less irritating to the oral tissue than conventional fine-cut snuff. Moreover, the bolus replaced the need for a mouth bag, which may not have been appealing to "macho" dippers.

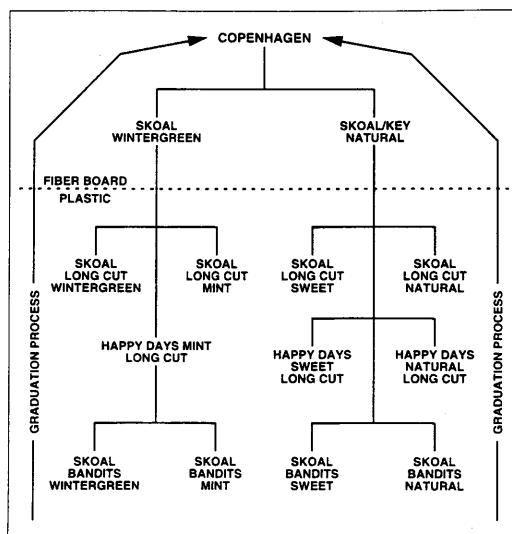


Figure 1 UST's "graduation strategy", as depicted in a UST document exhibited in the Marsee vs US Tobacco Company lawsuit. New users start with Skoal Bandits, progress to Happy Days brands or other Skoal products, and then "graduate" to Copenhagen

In addition, the mouth bag may have served as a barrier to nicotine absorption. Since 1984 UST has introduced an increasing variety of flavours of Long Cut. Today Cherry and Mint Long Cut are the two UST products most commonly given out as free samples, replacing Skoal Bandits as the sample of choice.

According to the 1972 Lotus memorandum¹⁵

There should be three products of three different tastes and strength of nicotine: a) High nicotine, strong tobacco flavor for consumer who presently uses tobacco in the mouth. Can this be accomplished by using present product of Copenhagen or Ettna?... b) Medium strength of nicotine. Can this be accomplished by using a Happy Days product?... c) Low nicotine, sweet product. Can this be done by using present size Lotus?... Do we flavor this product with honey, chocolate or vanilla?

According to several sources described below, the company developed a strategy for new users to "graduate" up to higher brands over time. A document entitled *The graduation theory*, prepared by marketing consultants for UST, described the process:

New users of smokeless tobacco – attracted to the category for a variety of reasons – are most likely to begin with products that are milder tasting, more flavored and/or easier to control in the mouth. After a period of time, there is a natural progression of product switching to brands that are more full-bodied, less flavored, have more concentrated "tobacco taste" than the entry brand.¹⁸

According to a 1983 article in *Advertising Age*,¹⁹ "the new product is designed to hook consumers into what Mr [Barry] Nova [president of UST's Tobacco Division] called a 'graduation process' from Bandits to Skoal itself and then to Copenhagen, the company's strongest chewing [sic] tobacco."

In 1985, Jack Africk, Vice President of UST, explained the strategy in a company newsletter *Up to snuff*²⁰: "As far as our strategy for entering a new market is concerned – for each market there is a set of criteria which have been established, and must be met. Skoal Bandits is the introductory product, and then we look towards establishing a normal *graduation process* [emphasis added]."

Nova, who left UST in 1984, described the process¹⁴: "For people who haven't ever tasted [snuff], you'd of course begin them on a product that had a little tobacco taste, but wouldn't turn them off. The *graduation* [emphasis added] is to a more tobacco-y product... to a stronger product."

Despite the impressive documentation of the graduation strategy in publicly disclosed UST literature and public statements by current and former employees of the company, UST officially denies that it has used a graduation process. However, Ken Carlson, a division manager in UST's sales department



Figure 2 Oliver Twist, a smokeless tobacco product made by the Danish company Hermann Krüger and marketed in the US, comes in five strengths, from Freshman ("perfect for beginners") to "Senior"

from 1979 to 1986, had this to say about the matter¹⁴: "They talked about graduation all the time—in sales meetings, memos and manuals for the college program. It was a mantra."

The graduation process was even depicted schematically in a UST diagram exhibited at the *Marsee* case (figure 1).²¹ The diagram shows a "graduation process", beginning with Skoal Bandits, progressing to Happy Days brands or other Skoal products, and then finally to Copenhagen.

Another oral snuff manufacturer, the Danish company Hermann Krüger, sells smokeless tobacco in the US under the brand name Oliver Twist. Oliver Twist brands come in five strengths ranging from "light" to "heavy" (figure 2). The lightest brand is called "Freshman" and is, according to the company's instructions, "perfect for beginners". "Senior" is the highest strength brand. It is for "Senior connoisseurs and experienced smokers".²²

The Pinkerton Tobacco Company, which is owned by Swedish Tobacco Company, manu-

factures a low nicotine product called Renegades, which is sold in mouth bags, and a high nicotine brand called Red Man oral snuff. The Conwood Company sells both a low nicotine brand, Hawken, and a high nicotine brand, Kodiak.⁷

Advertising and promotion of a graduation strategy

Oral snuff manufacturers promote and advertise starter brands through free sampling, which is done through the mail and at sponsored events. In addition, UST has had a College Marketing Program.²³ The only products given as free samples by UST are the low nicotine brands Skoal Bandits, Skoal Mint, and Skoal Cherry Long Cut. Cherry is a flavour particularly appealing to young people because of the sweet taste. During the last six months of 1984, over 400,000 free samples were mailed by UST in response to national magazine advertisements.²⁴ According to the Federal Trade Commission,²⁵ \$15.8 million (13% of all smokeless tobacco advertising and promotional expenditures) was spent on free sampling in 1993 and \$22.9 million (19%) on public entertainment, which included sponsored rodeos, auto racing, music concerts, and other events where free sampling is routinely done. A major UST target for these samples is the young. In 1977, Bill Falk, a spokesman for US Tobacco, said: "A lot of young people are getting into [snuff]. It's become a status thing. When a kid gets a new pair of jeans, he puts the snuff can in his back pocket and rubs



Figure 3 UST communicated with its college sales representatives through its newsletter *Smokeless Signals*

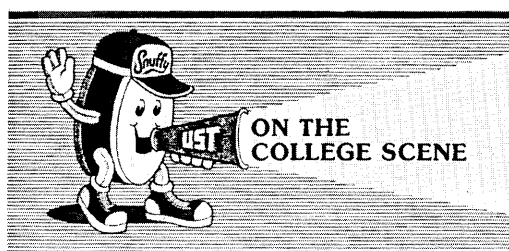


Figure 4 UST's mascot "Snuffy" keeps its sales representatives informed of developments "on the college scene"

SKOAL BANDITS

FOUNDING SPONSOR

LIBERTY 1886-1986

SKOAL BANDITS

Enjoy the little pouch of tobacco pleasure.

SKOAL BANDITS

It's as easy as 1-2-3.

- 1** Skoal Bandits is tobacco that comes wrapped in a neat, easy-to-use pouch. All you do is put it between your cheek and gum—the refreshing taste comes right through.
- 2** You *don't* chew it—Skoal Bandits is not chewing tobacco—it's a neater way to enjoy tobacco. There will be less saliva if you put the pouch between your upper cheek and gum.
- 3** You can enjoy Skoal Bandits anywhere. So it's perfect to take out in places where you can't light up. We're sure you'll be enjoying the "little pouch of tobacco pleasure" for a long time to come.

Figure 5 A brochure for Skoal Bandits explains that use of the product is "as easy as 1-2-3"

Walt Garrison answers your questions about moist smokeless tobacco.

Q: Walt, just what is Moist Smokeless Tobacco?

A: It's just what it says. Tobacco, you enjoy without lighting up and smoking.

Q: And, "a pinch is all it takes!" is that right?

A: You bet! Just take a small pinch in your thumb and forefinger, and put it between your cheek and gum. Leave it there. No need to chew. The tobacco slowly releases its great flavor giving you real satisfaction.

Q: Does "Going Smokeless" take some getting used to?

A: Sure. At first you could feel a slight irritation on the gum, and the tobacco may move around your mouth more than it should, and you might work up too much saliva. But learning is part of the fun, and these things pass with practice. Two weeks should make you a "pro."

Q: Is there a difference among the three brands?

A: There sure is. Happy Days is a mild, satisfying blend of mint-flavored



tobacco, while Skoal is full-bodied with the added good taste of wintergreen. Copenhagen is a stronger, natural blend of choice tobaccos. All three are packed in convenient cans and every one is dated for freshness.

Q: What's the cost?

A: We figure an average user dips about 1 1/2 cans per week at a cost of about \$1.00. Nice to know in these times when everything else costs so much.

Q: How many people use Happy Days, Skoal and Copenhagen?

A: A lot more than you might think. Last year we sold over 325 million cans. New users, of all ages from every part of the country, are joining up all the time. (Even loose-leaf chewers are mixing it in with their brands for extra flavor.)

Q: Thanks a lot, Walt. Where can I buy Happy Days, Skoal and Copenhagen?

A: Just ask for it at your favorite tobacco counter. Or mail the coupon below and we'll send you a free can of Happy Days to get you started.



SEND ME MY FREE CAN OF HAPPY DAYS
 Fill out and send to: "Smokeless Tobacco"
 100 W. Putnam Ave. DEPT. PA 003
 Greenwich, Conn. 06830

A pinch is all it takes!


Figure 6 A UST advertisement from Parade magazine (8 June 1980) uses former Dallas Cowboys football star Walt Garrison to explain how to use smokeless tobacco products. It explains that "learning is part of the fun" and that "New users, of all ages [emphasis added],...are joining up all the time."

it until the outline shows. It shows he's old enough to chew."²⁶

UST's College Marketing Program was established in the late 1970s and employed college representatives on hundreds of campuses throughout the US (figures 3 and 4). The following quotes are from the company's *College marketing manual*.²⁷ This was the training manual for student representatives. The first quotation describes the importance of creating new consumers from college students today because of their value as the adult market of the future: "Consider that within this vitally important market many college/young adult consumers have never had the opportunity to experience the enjoyment of smokeless tobacco. Success in reaching the college student today will determine the continued popularity and growth for our products in the young adult and older market segments tomorrow."

The next two quotes deal with the importance of providing free samples to college

Introducing Skoal Bandits Straight Smokeless tobacco has never been easier to enjoy.



Smooth, rich taste.
Convenient pouch.
Enjoy it anytime, anywhere.

Figure 7 An advertisement "introducing" Skoal Bandits, a smokeless tobacco product "easier to enjoy"

Sooner or later— it's Copenhagen.



It satisfies.

Figure 8 The advertisement for Copenhagen employs the slogan 'sooner or later it's Copenhagen', the highest free nicotine brand

students and of giving them specific instructions about how to use snuff:

It is fact that the only way to create a new user of our product is by having the consumer actually try the product. We are the ones who must get out to the consumer and show him the proper technique of using our smokeless tobacco.

Your number one objective is quality one-on-one sampling. When sampling, try to zero in on young smokers (smokers are usually more accepting of a

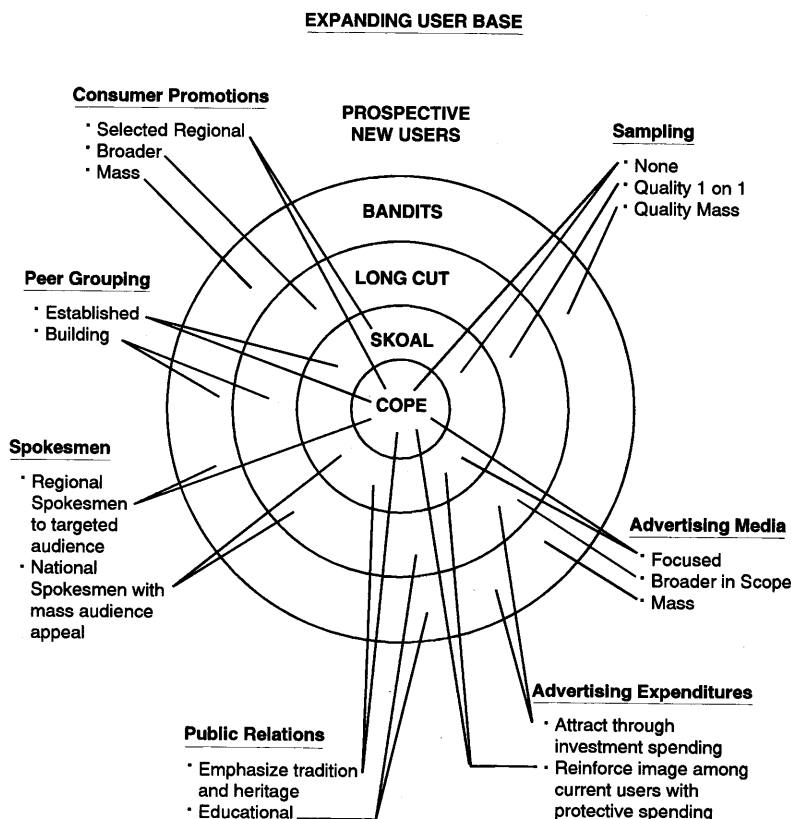


Figure 9 A UST chart, shown at a November 1994 Congressional hearing, which describes seven activities used by UST to expand its "user base". (This chart is a replica of the one presented at the hearing.)

sample as they already use tobacco, and 85% of smokers want to quit). Quality sampling presentations should include teaching non-users how to open the can, start with a small pinch, don't swallow product or juices, it will take time to get used to using oral tobacco, so keep on trying it, and inform the non-user where he can purchase the product.

Another quote from the manual instructs the student representative on how to deal with health inquiries from potential consumers or negative responses:

Don't discuss health issues with anyone. If someone is negative towards your sampling, a good line to use is that "If a person chooses to use tobacco, we would like them to use our product instead of someone else's product." Any further health related inquiries should be addressed to the Greenwich Office.

According to Leading National Advertisers, advertising expenditures for the low nicotine brands far outweigh those for the higher nicotine brands. In 1983, total US Tobacco advertising dollars for Skoal Bandits accounted for 47% of all company snuff advertising,²⁸ even though the brand made up only 2% of market share by weight.²⁹ Copenhagen, the highest nicotine brand made by UST, had only 1% of advertising expenditures²⁸ but 50% of market share.²⁹ UST spent \$5.8 million in 1990-1 for print advertising for Skoal and Skoal Bandits.³⁰ No print advertising was reported for Copenhagen.

Advertising messages for the low nicotine brands further support their role in the graduation strategy. Advertisements have provided non-users with instructions on how to use oral tobacco. A text for a Skoal Bandits brochure (figure 5) reads, "It's as easy as

1-2-3.... All you do is put it between your cheek and gum - the refreshing taste comes right through." In a 1980 advertisement by UST (figure 6), former Dallas Cowboys football star Walt Garrison answered questions about moist snuff, including this one:

Q: Does Going Smokeless take some getting used to?

A: Sure. At first you could feel a slight irritation on the gum, and the tobacco may move around your mouth more than it should, and you might work up too much saliva. But learning is part of the fun and these things pass with practice. Two weeks should make you a "pro."

This advertisement actually instructs the new user to ignore "irritation" - a natural warning sign of disease. It also boasts that: "New users, of all ages [emphasis added]... are joining up all the time."

Other advertisements show how advertising promotes the graduation strategy. An advertisement for Skoal Bandits used selling messages such as "Introducing" and "Easier to enjoy" (figure 7). In contrast, one for Copenhagen simply states: "Sooner or later - it's Copenhagen" (figure 8).

A 1986 brochure for Skoal Bandits³¹ offers new users instructions on how to use the product and conveys a clear understanding of how to develop tolerance to the toxic effects of a drug. According to the brochure:

How long should I keep the pouch in my mouth? If you haven't tried Skoal Bandits before, we recommend that you keep your first one in for about a minute - then remove. The next time you try another one, leave it in for a bit longer. Like your first beer, Skoal Bandits can be a taste that takes time to acquire and get the most out of. After four or five Skoal Bandits you'll find you've developed quite a taste for them and you'll want to keep a pouch in as long as the flavour lasts - this varies from person to person.

Further evidence documenting industry intent to move new users from low to high nicotine snuff products was presented to the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Health and the Environment at a hearing on 29 November 1994 on smokeless tobacco. Hearing Exhibit 4, a UST document released by Henry Waxman, then subcommittee chairman, describes seven activities that were used to expand UST's "user base" (figure 9). According to the exhibit, these marketing activities are intended to move new users from Skoal Bandits to Long Cut, to Skoal, and finally to Copenhagen. The seven marketing tools include sampling, advertising media, advertising expenditures, public relations, spokesmen, peer grouping, and consumer promotions. In the case of the low nicotine brand Skoal Bandits, mass sampling, mass advertising, and mass promotions are recommended. In contrast, the expansion strategy for the high nicotine Copenhagen calls for no sampling, focused advertising, and selected regional consumer promotions.

Conclusions

This evidence indicates that oral snuff manu-

facturers manipulate levels of free nicotine in oral snuff brands and that UST employs a graduation strategy based on free sampling of low nicotine brands with the intent of causing and maintaining nicotine dependence among young men with no history of tobacco use. The marketing campaign has resulted in a surge in snuff use among adolescent males. Other nations that were recently faced with the new introduction of oral snuff into their markets banned the products before use became widespread. Bans are now in effect in Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the European Union.³² The long-term impact on oral health and oral cancer from this marketing programme will be devastating unless steps are taken immediately to prevent smokeless tobacco manufacturers from promoting nicotine addiction to youth.

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